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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS AND JEREMY BERNDT

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON KWMN SA

SUBJECT: TWO WOMEN APPOINTED TO THE EASTERN PROVINCE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BOARD

REF: 09 DHRAHAN 275

CLASSIFIED BY: Joseph A. Kenny, Consul General, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (U) For the first time in the history of the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry (EPCCI), two women were appointed to the board. This follows disappointing results for the three different women candidates who ran unsuccessfully for the board in the recent elections. The appointment of two women was viewed as an expected yet novel step forward for women in the Eastern Province that could not have been realized without the Royal Family's leadership--and intervention. END SUMMARY.

POOR RESULTS AT THE POLLS FOR THE WOMEN CANDIDATES

¶12. (U) Elections for the EPCCI board were held over a five day period in late December. For only the second time in the board's history, women were allowed to run for seats on the board (REFTEL). Results for the three women who ran in the elections were as follows:

7 Souad al-Zaidi: 77 votes

7 Dina al-Fares: 17 votes

7 Fawzia al-Karri: 9 votes

These vote tallies are shockingly small, considering that the female membership of the EPCCI alone is over 1,200 strong.

¶13. (C) Samia al-Edrisi (protect), a prominent Saudi businesswoman and former candidate during the first EPCCI elections in 2005, said that with the exception of Souad al-Zaidi, the female candidates were virtual unknowns and that the campaign platforms for all three were unclear. When al-Edrisi and her colleagues at the Women's Business Forum appealed to their membership to vote for the women candidates, the women said that they refused to vote for the women just because of their gender.

APPOINTMENT PROCESS

¶4. (U) After the EPCCI holds elections for 12 of its 18 board members, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) appoints the remaining six board members (REFTEL). After the disappointing election results for the women candidates, it was widely expected that the MOCI would appoint at least one woman to the new board. The Eastern Province Women's Business Forum wrote to the MOCI appealing for the appointment of women to the board. On January 11, Minister of Commerce and Industry Abdullah Zainal Alireza announced the appointment of the six new board members, including two women - Hana Al-Zuhair and Samira Al-Suwaigh. Neither woman ran in the recent elections, but both are well-known in the business community. (Note: Hana Al-Zuhair was selected to the 2010 White House Entrepreneurship Summit. End Note.)

¶5. (U) After fighting for the inclusion of women while working for the EPCCI women's chamber, Al-Zuhair was appointed in 2007 by the Governor of the Eastern Province Prince Muhammad bin Fahd to lead his Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Fund for Supporting Small Business Projects for Women. The Fund, which also houses the Princess Jawaher Center for Women's Research and Development (REFTEL), is viewed as being on the leading edge of women's rights in the Eastern Province. The Fund has assisted more than a dozen women launch small businesses. Additionally, Al-Zuhair once led a delegation of women entrepreneurs from the EP to present their case for increased women's freedoms to the Shura Council. Al-Suwaigh is known for her role in the success of the Al-Moaibed Group, a conglomerate of businesses in the EP with interests in paper products, plastics, petroleum services, and heavy haul transportation.

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A ROYAL GIFT

¶6. (C) The dominant view is that the appointment of Al-Zuhair and Al-Suwaigh could not have taken place without intervention by Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, acting on behalf of King Abdullah. PDOFF spoke with Al-Zuhair on the day her appointment was announced, and Al-Zuhair emphasized Prince Muhammad's role in the appointments. She was later quoted in EP newspaper Al Yaum: "The Saudi Minister of Commerce and Industry decision to appoint women to the Chamber Board is a direct result of Saudi leadership support for Saudi women and recognition of their important role in the Saudi economy . . . This appointment is a significant achievement - supported by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz who supports Saudi women."

¶7. (C) According to Al-Idrisi (protect), King Abdullah also came to the rescue when, on one of the days of the election, the three women candidates were prevented from entering EPCCI grounds where only men are allowed. The candidates phoned Al-Idrisi, who in turn phoned EPCCI Chairman Al-Rashed, who phoned the MOCI Minister Alireza, who eventually gave orders to allow the women to enter the building. According to Al-Idrisi, the Minister was "obviously" speaking and acting on behalf of the King.

PUBLIC REACTION

¶8. (C) Reaction to the news of Al-Zuhair's and Al-Suwaigh's appointments was muted, likely because the appointment of at least one woman was expected. One prominent businessman said that the appointments were expected because "this is in line with the King's vision." Al-Zuhair said that she is prepared for a backlash from conservatives, but has yet to report any specific incidents of backlash. She said that a lot of women were not happy with the appointments because the women who were appointed did not run in the election.

IN THEIR FIRST ACT AS BOARD MEMBERS~

¶9. (U) On January 25, board members of the EPCCI re-elected U.S.-educated Abdulrahman al-Rashed to his third consecutive term as Board Chairman. He obtained 14 of the 18 possible votes. Both al-Suwaigh and al-Zuhair expressed delight in al-Rashed's appointment as well as in the opportunity to take place in what al-Suwaigh described as a milestone: "Women finally have become part of the decision-making process."

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The appointments of two women to the EPCCI board are notable in their impact on the advancement of women's rights in the Kingdom. Perhaps more significant, however, is the overall reaction of acceptance, lack of surprise, and full acknowledgement that the only way women's rights in Saudi Arabia will advance is if the charge is led from the very top. Every positive step is viewed as a direct result of the King's influence and leadership. The enthusiasm about King Abdullah's reform agenda and its direct impact on women's rights overshadowed the disappointment with lack of advancement from the grassroots level. The groundwork has been laid with the appointment of these two women to the EPCCI Board. The success of women candidates in future elections will depend in large part on the performance of these two pioneers.

¶11. (C) The trend toward greater freedoms and participation for women in Saudi society is slow. However, incremental progress for reform is the modus operandi of the SAG. It is expected that such trends will continue, albeit at a similarly slow, but measured pace. End Comment.

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